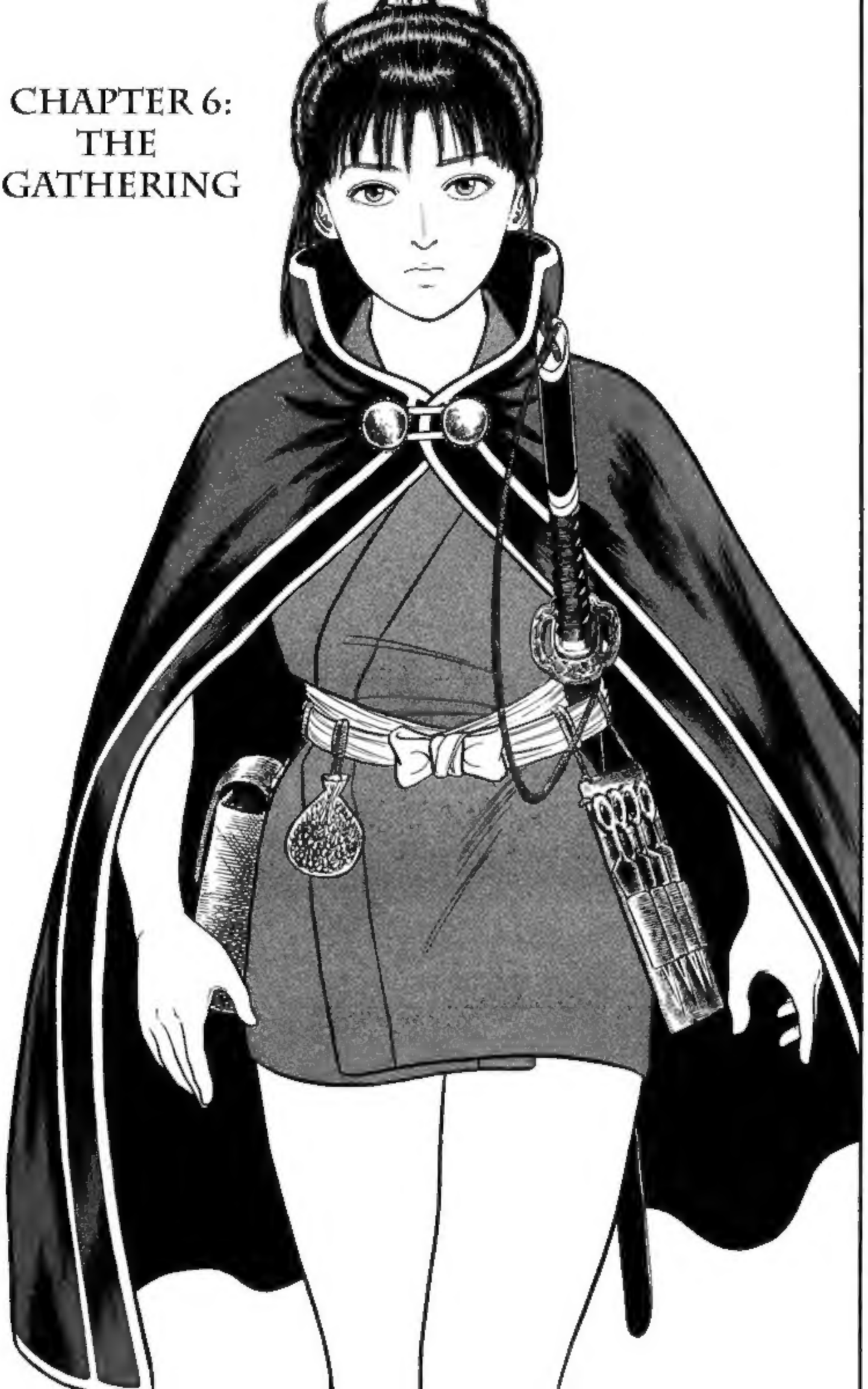
CHAPTER 6: THE GATHERING



TODAY WE JUST HAVE TO WAIT.
IT'S WISER FOR HYŌSUKE TO FIND OUT WHERE THE ENEMY IS LODGING AND INFORM US.
YOU STICK OUT WHEN YOU WALK AROUND, AZUMI. THE ENEMY COULD EASILY FIND THIS INN.

HATSUNE WILL SETTLE THINGS TODAY.
I KNOW.
YES.

2

HATSUNE-SAN... I HOPE YOU'RE SUCCESSFUL.

YOU CAN LEAVE EVERYTHING TO ME AND LET ME TAKE CARE OF THE REST, WAH HA HA HA.
I SAID I WAS GONNA PROTECT YOU!
AH..UMM.. PLEASE... WAIT!
NO CAN DO!
PL-PLEASE MAKE THEM LEAVE!
YOU'LL FIND THIS SORTA THING CAN BE EXCITING, YOU KNOW!
WHEN YOU GET USED TO IT
3

AHH
HHH!

MMF!

PLEASE!
I BEG YOU!
MAKE THEM
LEAVE!

AH HH!
OH, NO. LOOOOOK! I'M GONNA MAKE YOU GOOD AND ASHAMED!
THIS TURNS ME ON MORE!
I WON'T HAVE THE CHANCE TO KILL HIM...

WHAT IF...
TOO LATE.
.....
SHE'S LATE.

KAGARI-DONO, PLEASE TELL ME THE INN THAT HATSUNE-SAN WENT TO.
I'M WORRIED. I WANT TO GO SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING.

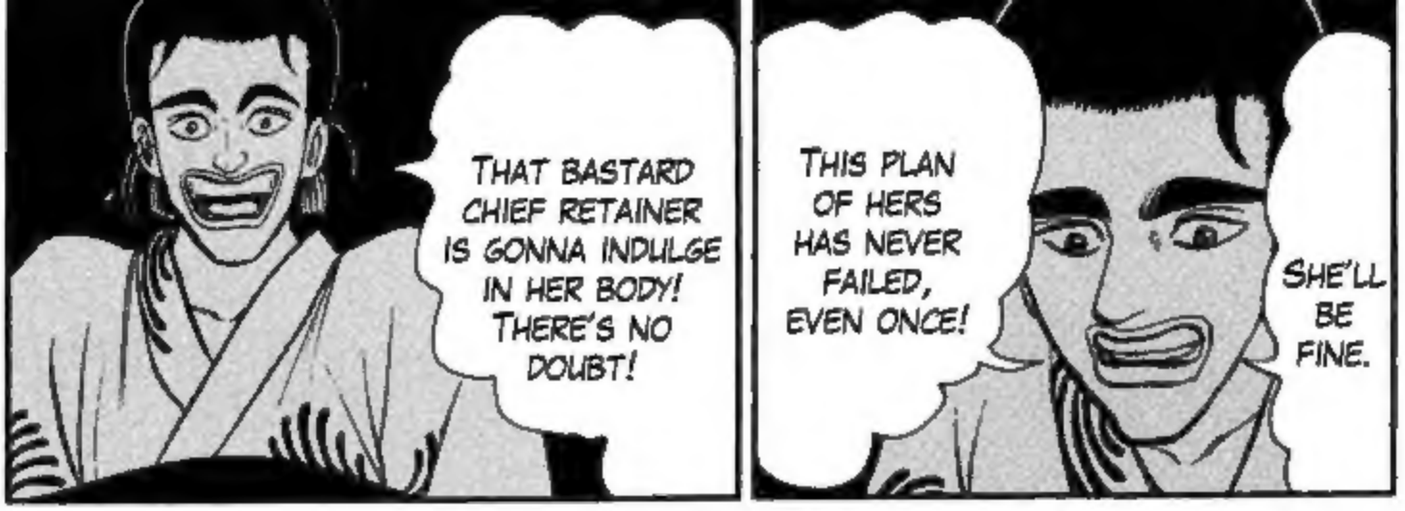
PLEASE TELL ME!

.....
IT'S TRUE. SHE'S TOO LATE.

I.... DON'T KNOW.
WELL ...

SO I LEFT IT ALL TO HER!
WELL, I TRUST HER!
YOU DON'T ...?
EH!?
I ONLY PLAYED THE PART OF THE BODY-GUARD OF A MONEY-LENDER...
NO WAY!
WERE REAL DANGER-OUS GUYS!
I HAD NO WAY TO FOLLOW HER TO THE INN THERE! THOSE TWO BODYGUARDS

ALL THE MORE REASON TO FOLLOW HER!!


THAT BASTARD CHIEF RETAINER IS GONNA INDULGE IN HER BODY! THERE'S NO DOUBT!
THIS PLAN OF HERS HAS NEVER FAILED, EVEN ONCE!
SHE'LL BE FINE.

THAT BASTARD, UNEXPECTEDLY, TRIED TO IMPRESS HER AND PUT ON SOME AIRS...
.....
.....
.....

.....
.....
HE MIGHT EVEN BE WRAPPED UP WITH HER UNTIL TOMORROW EVENING!

.....
HATSUNE IS GONNA KILL HIM! THERE'S NO DOUBT!
SHE'S GONNA BE FINE!

SHE NEVER CAME BACK.

AHH! WE CAN SEE THEM!
MUST BE THE TORII THEY'RE LINING UP!
YEP! MUST BE!
SO THAT'S WHERE THE INFO ABOUT DATE MASAMUNE-SAN ARRIVING IS, RIGHT?
MMM... SHOULD BE!

GOT IT!
THAT'S THE SIGN.
IT SHOULD BE SOMETHING ROLLED INTO THE BASE.

THIS BLACK LEGGINGS!?
THIS IS IT, EH!?
I FOUND IT, MASTER!

NO DOUBT, IT'S THE SIGN THAT DATE MASAMUNE-SAMA IS GONNA COME.
IT'S ROLLED ON BOTH SIDES!

UNDERSTAND?
BUT IN THIS LAND, WE'RE STRANGERS.
THE ONE WHO'S COMING UP THE STAIRS IS OUR COMRADE KAMIYAMA HACHIRŌDONO.
OOH!
YES!

BLACK LEGG-INGS.
INO!

YES!
I SEE. SO HE CAME!

I'LL GIVE YOU LOTS OF ATTENTION WHEN I'M BACK!

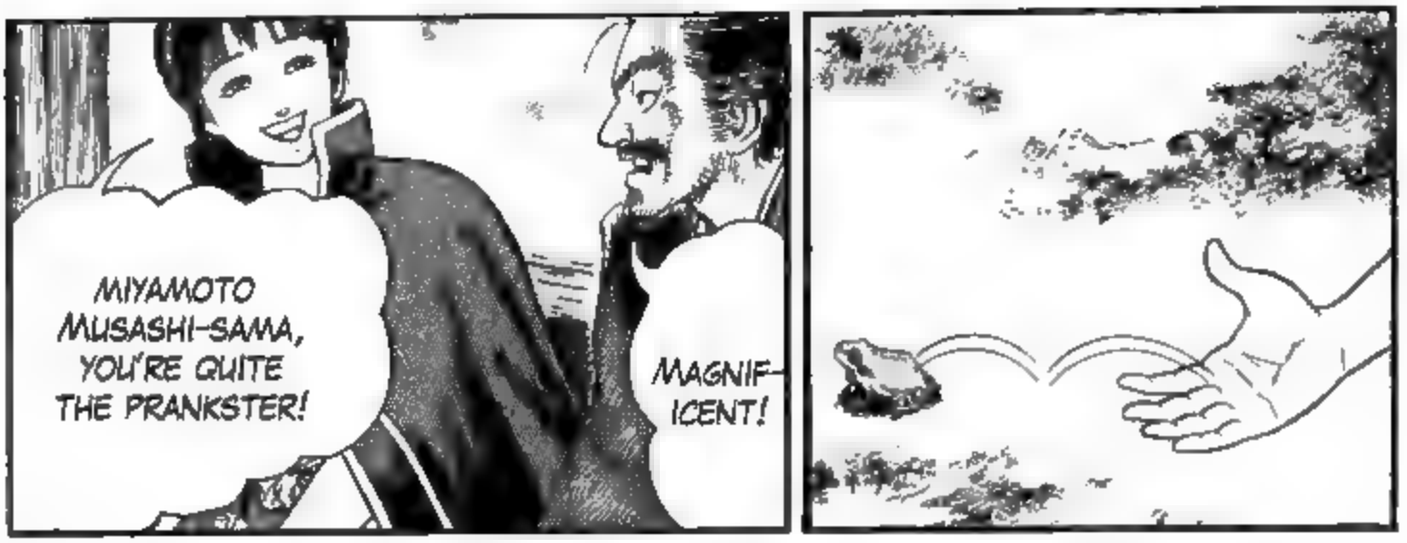
THEN LET'S BE ON OUR WAY!

HATSUNE-SAN... WHAT'S HAPPENED TO YOU...?

SHE DIDN'T LEAVE THE INN AT ALL, NEITHER YESTERDAY NOR TODAY...
SHE SEEMS TO BE WAITING FOR SOMETHING?
WHAT TO DO?
WHAT SHOULD I DO
TO GET HER INTERESTED IN HAVING A SERIOUS MATCH WITH ME...?

GOOD MORN-ING.

HUH?
I INTEND NO OFFENSE. PLEASE DON'T BE AFRAID.


MIYAMOTO MUSASHI-SAMA, YOU'RE QUITE THE PRANKSTER!
MAGNIF-ICENT!

SINCE YOU DID NOT KNOW IF WHAT WAS THROWN WAS A STONE OR AN EDGED TOOL, CATCHING IT WITH THE HANDS OR REPELLING IT COULD HAVE HURT YOUR HANDS.
MOVING YOUR HEAD WOULD'VE WORKED...
I WANTED TO SEE IF YOU'D SIMPLY DODGGE IT OR CATCH IT.
I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD HIT YOUR FACE.

HOWEVER...NOW, YOU DID NOT ONLY DODGE IT, YOU EXTENDED YOUR HAND AND CAUGHT IT WITHOUT BEING SURPRISED!!
REALIZED IN THAT SHORT INSTANT THAT WHAT I THREW WAS A MERE FROG?
DOES THAT MEAN THAT YOU...

YOU REALIZED I HAD NO LETHAL INTENT!?
DOES IT MEAN THAT, FROM REALIZING IN AN INSTANT THAT WHAT I THREW AT A CRUSHING SPEED FROM THIS SHORT DISTANCE WAS A FROG, SOMETHING THAT YOU COULD HAVE BRUSHED AWAY WITH YOUR BARE HANDS,

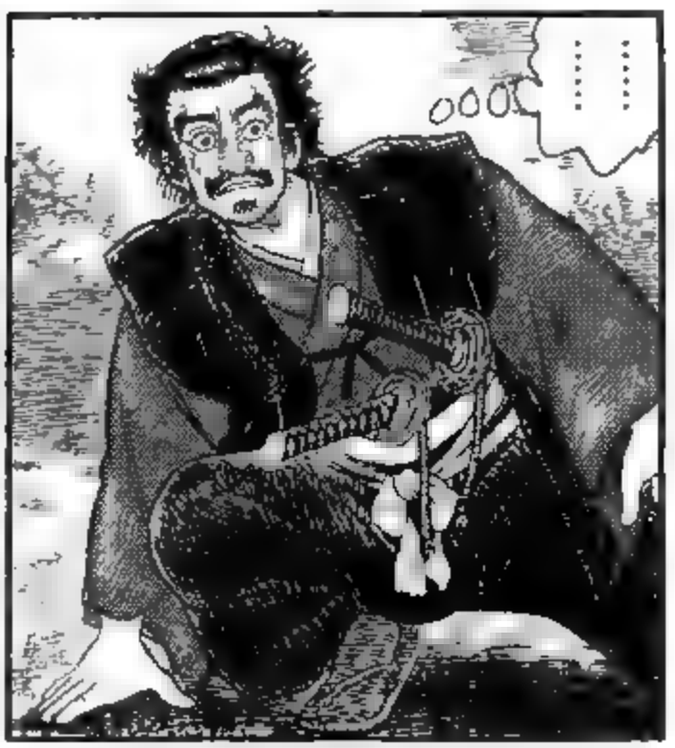
!!
COM-
RADES?
SO,
THAT
FELT A
LITTLE...
NOST-
ALGIC.
WHEN I WAS
LITTLE, PRANKS
LIKE THIS
WERE PRETTY
COMMON WITH
MY COMRADES.

!!
GRAMPA?
HE SAID
IT'D BE
GOOD
TRAINING
FOR OUR
EYES!
YES!
GRAMPA!
DID YOU
HAVE A
MASTER
WHO
DID THIS
WITH
YOU!?

WHAT IS
YOUR
GRAND-
FATHER'S
NAME!?
AZUMI!

WHAT'S YOUR MASTER'S NAME!?
I'M SORRY! SEE YA LATER!

THE TARGETS WENT ONE AFTER THE OTHER TO THAT TEMPLE DATE MASAMUNE HAS CONNECTIONS TO.
YES?


OOO
.....

THAT WOULD MEAN DATE MASA-MUNE HAS FINALLY ARRIVED.

TODAY COULD BE THE DAY THEY GATHER IN FULL.

IS HE TRYING...TO TEST ME, SEEING IF I'LL STAY HERE OR ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE!?

WAIT HERE FOR MY RETURN!
FROM YOUR STORY, YOU HAVE NO PLACE TO RETURN TO, RIGHT...?
I WONDER IF HE SUSPECTS SOME-THING?

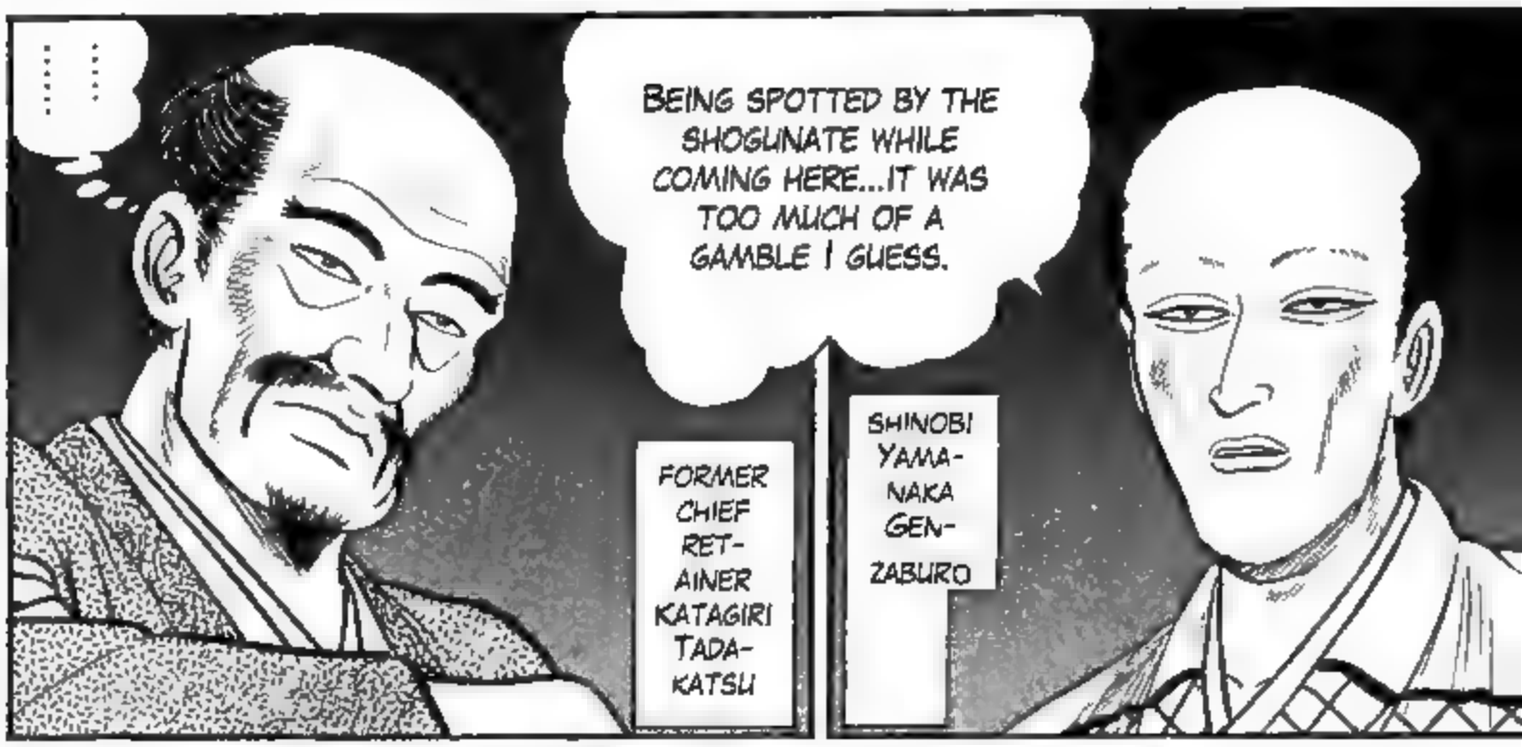
I CAN'T ESCAPE THAT DAMN BEAST ANYWAYS.
AT ANY RATE...

BUT AS FOR THE REMAINING SHINOBI, THERE WAS NOT A SINGLE ONE OF THEM WHO KNEW WHAT FACE HE HAD.
ONLY THE TWO FORMER CHIEF RETAINERS HAD SEEN DATE MASAMUNE, AND ONLY FROM AFAR.
THEY WERE PEOPLE WHO CAME TOGETHER AFTER A CONSIDERABLE EXCHANGE OF SECRET MESSAGES WITH DATE MASAMUNE THROUGH MEDIATORS...

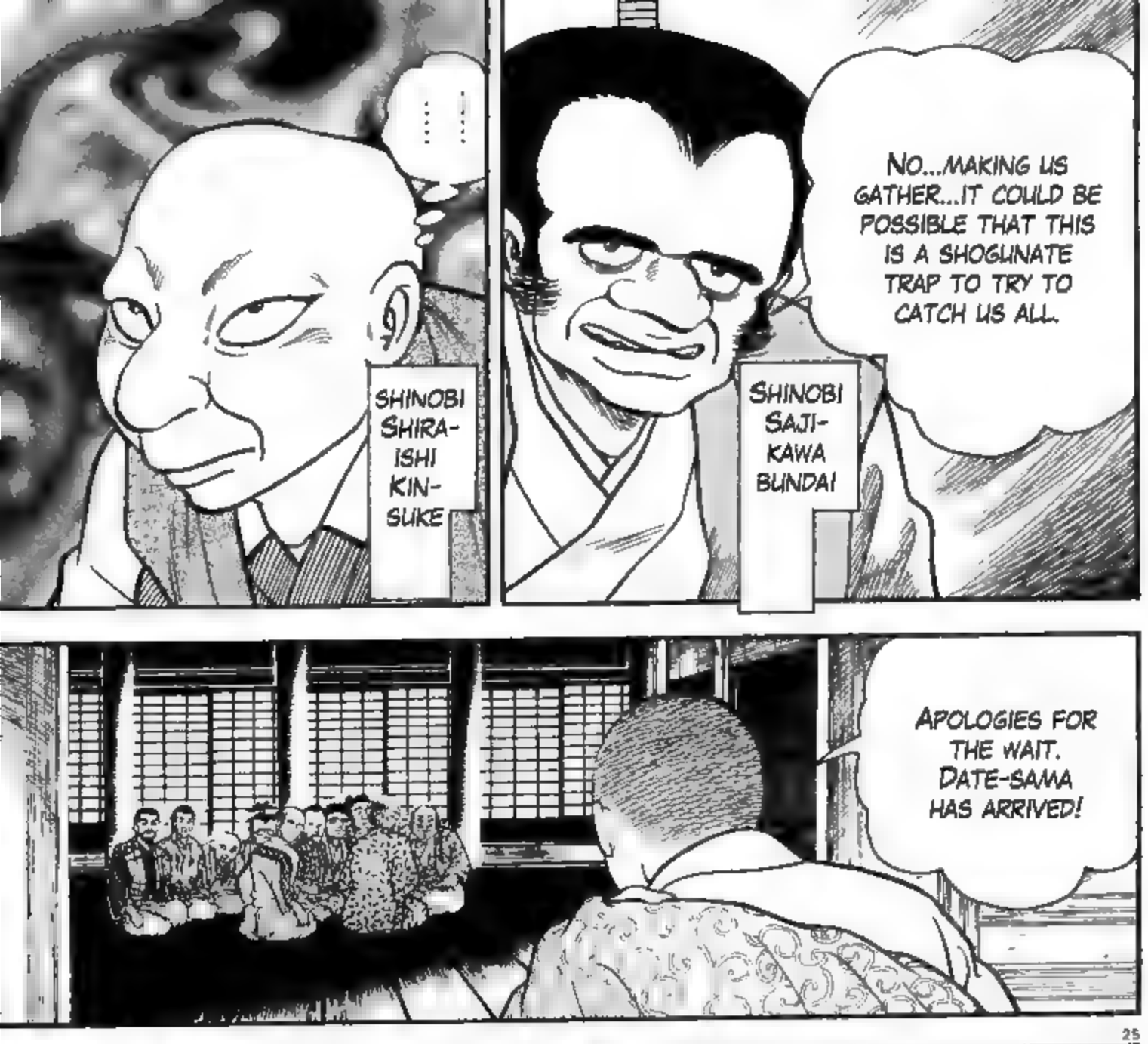
NO MATTER HOW SECRET THIS IS, EVEN FOR SOMEONE LIKE DATE MASAMUNE-SAMA...DO YOU THINK THAT IT'S POSSIBLE FOR HIM TO HAVE COME ALL THE WAY HERE FROM SENDAI ALONE, WITH ONLY ONE ATTENDANT!?

FORMER CHIEF RETAINER KOBORI SHIGEMASA
YOU'RE RIGHT! IT'S UNTHINKABLE! SHOULDN'T HIS RETAINERS KNOW OF SUCH A THING!?

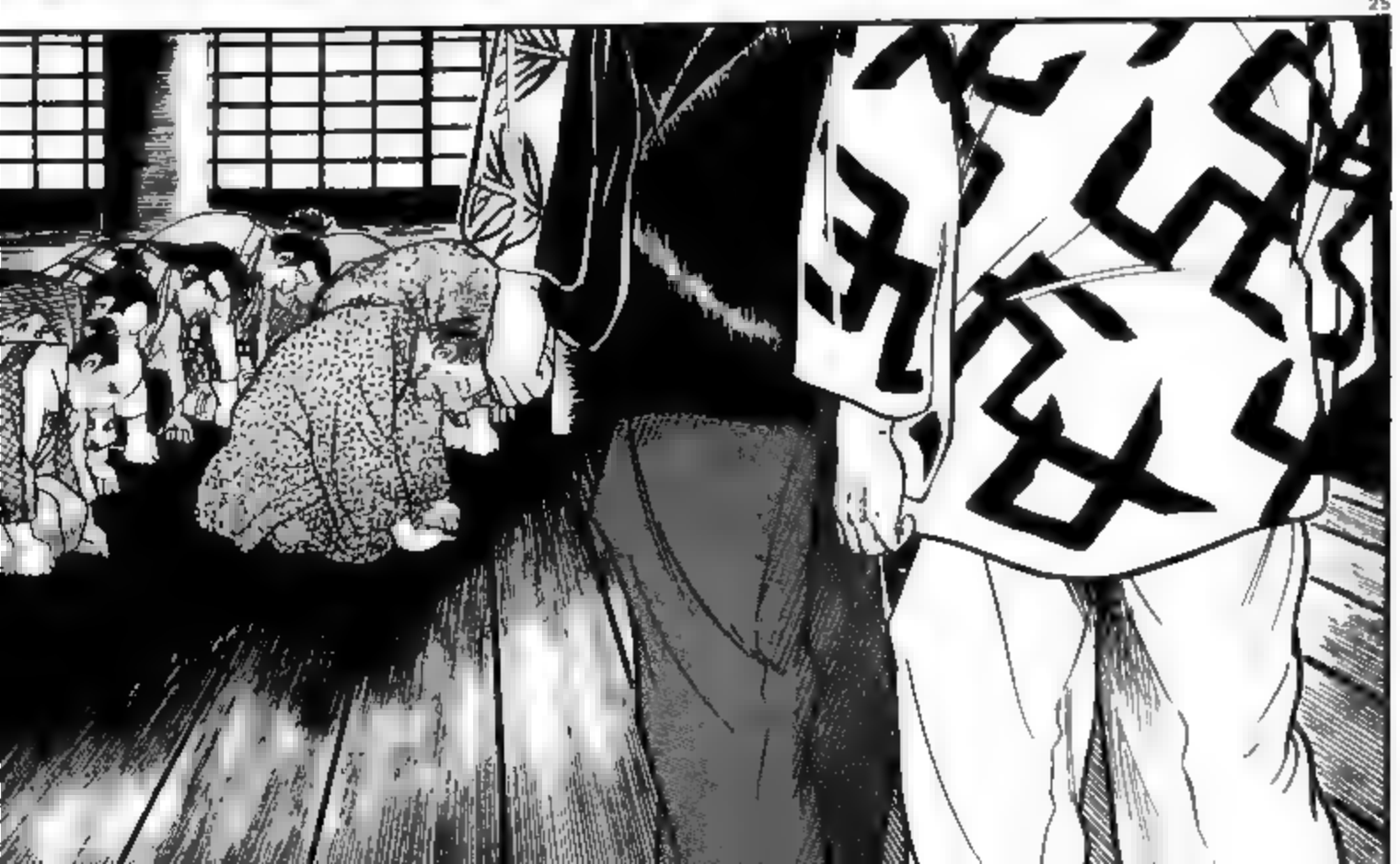
POSS-
IBLY.
SHINOBI
KURO-
KAWA
GENGO
SO IS
IT ONLY
DATE-
SAMA'S
BODY
DOUBLE?
SHINOBI
UDA
SON-
JŪRŌ


.....
BEING SPOTTED BY THE SHOGUNATE WHILE COMING HERE...IT WAS TOO MUCH OF A GAMBLE I GUESS.
FORMER
CHIEF
RET-
AINER
KATAGIRI
TADA-
KATSU
SHINOBI
YAMA-
NAKA
GEN-
ZABURO

.....
SHINOBI
IKEDA
TŌNAI
A BODY DOUBLE...I MEAN, DOES HE THINK WE WILL BE SATISFIED MEETING WITH A SUBSTITUTE OF HIM!?
SHINOBI
KŌSAKA
GUNJI
SHINOBI
KAMI-
YAMA
HACHIRŌ


.....
SHINOBI SHIRA-ISHI KIN-SUKE
NO...MAKING US GATHER...IT COULD BE POSSIBLE THAT THIS IS A SHOGUNATE TRAP TO TRY TO CATCH US ALL.
SHINOBI SAJI-KAWA BUNDAI

APOLOGIES FOR THE WAIT. DATE-SAMA HAS ARRIVED!



DATE MASA-MUNE.
I AM...
THANK YOU FOR COMING.

NO MATTER HOW SECRET THIS ALL IS...
SPEAK.
MM.
I AM VERY SORRY, BUT THERE IS SOMETHING I'D LIKE TO...

THAT IS... SOMETHING VERY DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE!
WE HEARD THAT SIR DATE MASAMUNE-SAMA, CAME FROM SENDAI TO THIS FAR AWAY LAND ALONE WITH JUST ONE ATTENDANT...

I SHALL ANSWER.
THE ONE ACCOMPANYING ME IS ABE KURANDO, WHO MANAGES THE SHINOBI CLAN KUROHABAKI
KURANDO ALONE IS WORTH MORE THAN DOZENS OF SKILLED GUARDS.
MY RETAINERS THOUGHT THE SAME AND SO EVERYTHING WAS ENTRUSTED TO KURANDO ALONE.

I AM ABE KURANDO OF THE KURO-HABAKI CLAN. IT IS A PLEA-SURE TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAIN-TANCE.

.....
OH!
OOH! YOU'RE ABE KURANDO-DONO!

AS A SHINOBI, I TRULY ADMIRE YOU!
I AS WELL!

THE FAMOUS ABE KURANDO-DONO!
DEEP DOWN, I WAS HOPING TO MEET

IS HE SUCH A VETE-RAN?
OH, YES! TRULY!

I'M SORRY..
BUT EVEN IF HE...WAS REALLY ABE KURANDO OF THE KUROHABAKI CLAN...
AMONG US, THERE IS NOBODY WHO HAS SEEN YOUR FACE FROM NEARBY, SIR...

WE'RE ALL MEN WHO PLAN TO RISK OUR LIVES IN THIS WAR FROM HERE ON IN!
SO, PLEASE, SIR! SHOW US PROOF THAT YOU ARE TRULY DATE MASAMUNE!

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